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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)**

Mark Bauerlein

New York: Tarcher/Penguin Books, 2008. Bibliography. 264 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781585426393

There has always been a tradition of distrusting the younger generation, of feeling that somehow they are not as hardworking, as engaged, or as knowledgeable as their elders. Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation* has as its thesis that the current generation is, in fact, less accomplished and skilled than their predecessors and that this has occurred as a result of their pervasive use of new media in the form of computers, the Internet, cell phones, blogging, and Facebook. According to him, "Instead of opening young American minds to the stores of civilization and science and politics, technology has contracted the horizon to themselves and the social scene around them" (p. 10). The new technologies have made it possible for America's youth to isolate themselves in a cocoon—of teen imagery, songs, hot gossip, games, and youth-to-youth communications—that is instantaneous, limited, and isolating.

Bauerlein's argument contradicts the widely accepted notion that computing and the Internet are setting in motion a potential renaissance in individuals' abilities to access information and create new ideas. In a forthcoming book I have written titled *The Analytical Engine: Computers, Knowledge and the Transformation of Learning*, I argue, for example, that computers have the potential to transform our ways of knowing and our actual intelligence in much the way the Gutenberg revolution and the book transformed Western society during the early Renaissance. In the case of the computer, the fact that anyone can produce a written document that is virtually free of spelling errors as long as they use a spell-checker function is an important example of Douglas Engelbart's notion of the computer as augmenting intelligence, in much the way that eyeglasses augment our ability to see. (Engelbart is the inventor of the computer mouse, and the concept of "windows" and "icons.")

Engelbart's arguments and the related concepts of "networked knowledge" and "collective intelligence" do not necessarily contradict Bauerlein's argument. The computer as a "prosthetic device for the extension of our intellects" (my own terminology) is a reality. One need only look

at the role of the computer in making possible the Human Genome Project or the creation of vast online repositories such as the Library of Congress's American Memory Project. It is hard to imagine how science, the humanities, medicine, and business functioned in the past without the resources provided by digital culture. The essentials of our economy and of our creative efforts lie in the use of the new machines. But are they being universally embraced? Are they being used effectively by only the best and the brightest and perhaps even the most privileged? Are the great number of our youth simply using the computer and its related technologies to amuse themselves and to isolate themselves within a self-congratulatory youth culture?

I believe the answer is, quite possibly, yes. The evidence Bauerlein presents in his book confirms my belief. As the author reports, the young are retreating from traditional reading. Voluntary reading rates fell through the floor between 1982 and 2002, particularly among the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old age group where the numbers declined from 59.8 percent in 1982 to 42.8 percent in 2002. According to Bauerlein, we are seeing a "retreat from books" (p. 47)—particularly fiction, poetry, and drama.

Are we seeing a new type of literacy emerging in the place of reading? After all, children and young adults are doing a huge amount of reading and writing online. Doesn't all of the e-mailing and IM (Instant Messaging) that is going on require reading and writing? Doesn't writing a paper or report online require reading documents and processing and reviewing information? The answer is, of course, yes. But the reading and writing

the young are doing is not necessarily the same type that engaged readers in the past. What the young are doing is not sustained reading. It is, instead, a type of reading that tends not to be critical or close reading. Researching a paper for a young student often involves skimming online sources and pasting bits and pieces of information together. There is very little critical literacy involved. The model becomes one of "information retrieval, not knowledge formation" (p. 94).

Bauerlein believes that, for most younger users, the Internet and its related technologies have not made them "better writers and readers, sharper interpreters and more discerning critics, more knowledgeable citizens and tasteful consumers" (p. 110). Instead, it has isolated them from older members of the culture and the larger society, including its cultural, social, and political issues. This new screen environment is often impoverished compared to its older textual/book-oriented counterpart. In terms of reading in a digital versus a more traditional fixed-print context, for example, Bauerlein makes clear that "rare" words and their use, complex words that provide shaded interpretations and meaning, are nowhere near as evident in oral language and online environments. Adult books, for example, have twice the number of rare words used in adult television. We have a paradox at work. The extraordinary and information-rich environment of the Internet and related digital technologies functions for most youths as an information-poor and isolating environment. According to Bauerlein, "For most rising users, screen time doesn't graduate them into higher knowledge/skill states. It superpowers their social impulses, but it blocks intellectual gains" (p.139).

Bauerlein's book is a cautionary tale. It should be of particular value to those interested in play and its role in shaping the individual. If Bauerlein is correct, then we need to be sure that our children are exposed in our educational system to social interaction, transgenerational communication, and similar types of learning, instead of their just cruising the Internet and making friends on Facebook. The facts seem to suggest that much of traditional play and the instruments of play, like hands-on games and toys, are being replaced by digital systems. Consider the difference between playing a game of war outdoors with the neighborhood kids, in place of playing a game of *Halo* on the X-box. What is the difference between reading a great piece of children's literature such as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* and simply skimming information off the Internet? What does playing with a scientific toy like a gyroscope, a kaleidoscope, or a top inform a child about the world versus a computer simulation or description of the same toy?

New media are clearly redefining the experiences of childhood and youth culture. Our technologies shape us. More than a generation ago, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that any technology mediates human experience and selects certain characteristics for *amplification* and *reduction*. Which of our children's experiences are amplified by the new technologies and which are reduced? This is the critical question raised by Bauerlein, and it is one that concerns all of us interested in children and youth and the future of play.

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### **Interactive Play for Children with Autism**

*Diana Seach*

New York: Routledge, 2007. References, figures, 211 pp. \$39.95 paper. ISBN: 9780415333269

The growing numbers of children diagnosed with autism-spectrum disorders are drawing significant attention to identifying effective education and therapeutic interventions. Autism refers here to a broad definition that ranges from severe to mild forms of classic autism and Asperger syndrome, all of which share common features. Lorna Wing and Judith Gould identified these features (what they called a "triad of impairments" in reciprocal social interaction, communication, and imagination) that characterized autism in their 1979 article for the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. As I noted in *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism* (1999), these core challenges are inextricably linked to a child's capacity to develop spontaneous play across social and symbolic dimensions.

Diana Seach's *Interactive Play for Children with Autism* presents an approach that adds to the wide array of play interventions that are now available for children with autism. Drawing on her personal experience as an educator and family consultant, Seach describes an adult-child-oriented intervention that is aimed at professionals and parents of children representing diverse ages and abilities across the autism spectrum. The book is described as a comprehensive guide to establishing shared play experiences that assist in the development of communication, social understanding, and cognition. Seach further defines the interactive-play